

Gray Squirrel

Tennessee Department of Agriculture, Division of Forestry



Gray squirrels need hardwoods, especially nut producers (hickory, beech, white oak group, and red/black oak group, in that order, and walnut where it occurs.) Berries, soft fruits, buds, seeds, and fungi are supporting foods. Red maple is particularly important in early spring and mulberry in May and June. Foods by season include:

August-October:

Nuts and acorns
Sugar maple, pine and yellow poplar and seeds
Hornbeam seeds
Dogwood, blackgum, hawthorn and cherry fruits
Fungi
Insects

November-January:

Nuts (including acorns)
Blackgum fruit
Yellow poplar seed

February-April:

Red and black oak acorns
Fungi
Buds & flowers
Red maple seeds

May-July:

Buds, flowers
Berries
Fungi
Insects
Yellow poplar seeds

Select only trees that should be able to live for at least 25 more years.

How to harvest timber to favor squirrels:

1. Thin existing stands to increase mast production and stimulate growth of foods beneath the canopy. Squirrels prefer a well-developed forest mid-story.
2. Protect grapevines (if not damaging crop trees.)
3. Use timber harvest methods that allow good oak regeneration, leave evenly distributed mast-bearing trees and den trees, promote good hard mast crops and supporting foods. Alternatives:
 - harvest small blocks of trees (1/4 to 1 acre)
 - create a two-age forest (harvest roughly 1/2 of the trees when the stand is between age 40 and 80 and plan on harvesting the rest in 20 to 40 years). This ensures continuous mast production and good midstory growth.
 - use a "wildlife shelterwood", i.e., leave several large mast-bearing trees per acre
 - avoid diameter limit cutting. If diameter limit harvesting is used, leave hard mast-bearing trees and are potential den trees.
4. Leave den trees, especially if clearcutting.
5. Regenerate oak (this can be difficult on good sites – see a forester to improve success.)
6. Schedule timber harvests to ensure a steady supply of oaks of prime mast producing age.

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Nuts (hard "mast") are the mainstay of squirrels' diet in the critical fall, winter and early spring months. Half of the forest should be oak, beech and hickory. Acorn production usually starts about age 20-25 and peaks between age 40 and 80. Generally, red oaks produce the highest yields, followed by white and chestnut oaks, then black oak. Acorn crops are not consistent from year to year; good crops usually occur only every 2-5 years. White oak bear seed annually, red oaks every other year. White oak acorns are more edible, while red oak acorns are more durable. A mix of oak species is best. Sawtooth (or Chinese) oak seedlings can be planted to provide heavy yields every year, beginning at an early age.

Shelter is important. Squirrel pup survival is much better in waterproof dens than in leaf nests. Good den trees must usually be at least 40 years old. Maple, beech and black cherry are especially good. Retain at least 1 or 2 potential den trees per acre (3 is ideal) during all stages of forest growth.